

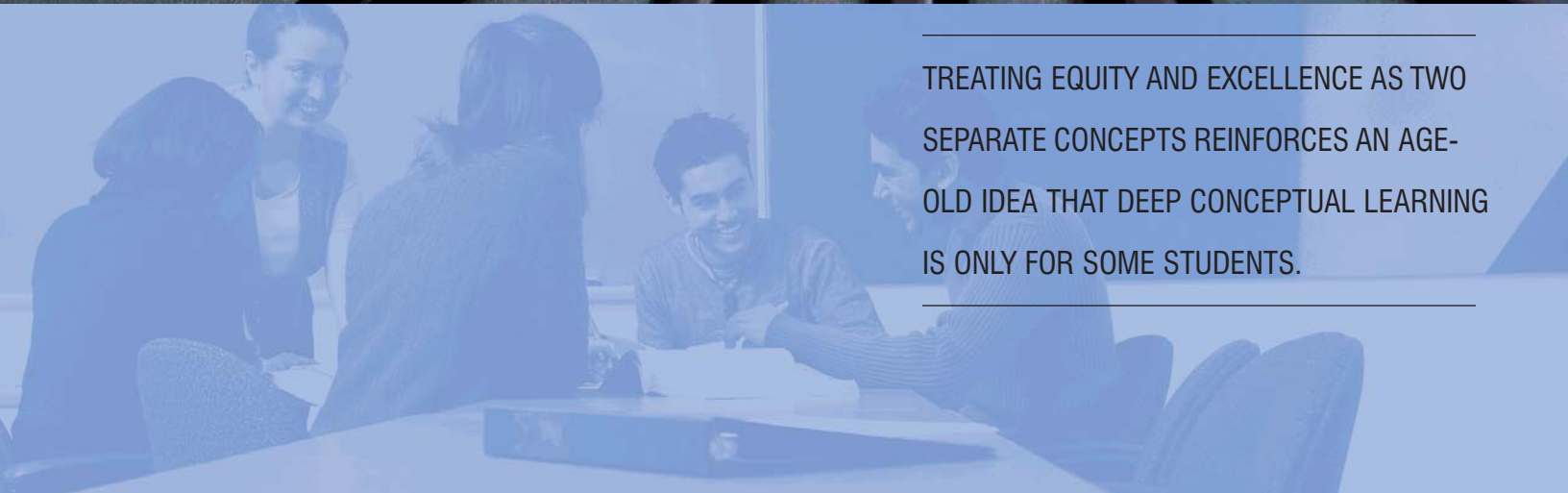
# STUDENT ENGAGEMENT FOR



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TREATING EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE AS TWO SEPARATE CONCEPTS REINFORCES AN AGE-OLD IDEA THAT DEEP CONCEPTUAL LEARNING IS ONLY FOR SOME STUDENTS.

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**EN BREF** On cherche de plus en plus des façons d'accroître l'engagement des élèves, car les preuves s'accumulent que le désengagement est fréquemment lié aux environnements d'apprentissage. La conception de désengagement comporte souvent deux dimensions – soit sociale (participation à la vie scolaire) et scolaire (participation aux exigences de réussite scolaire). L'ajout de la dimension intellectuelle (investissement psychologique et cognitif important dans l'apprentissage) procure un cadre plus complet pour comprendre le rôle que pourrait jouer l'engagement des élèves pour « relever la barre et combler l'écart ». L'engagement intellectuel se développe lorsque les élèves doivent effectuer du travail pertinent, intéressant et relié à leurs aspirations; lorsqu'ils font du travail authentique, stimulant, très conceptuel, très social et collaboratif; lorsque les idées de chaque élève sont estimées; lorsque la relation entre l'enseignant et l'élève, ainsi qu'entre les élèves, est à la fois réciproque et généreuse.

# EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND DEEP LEARNING

**TODAY, ALL YOUNG PEOPLE** need to learn to *use their minds well* through deep engagement in learning that reflects skills, knowledge, and dispositions fit for their present lives as well as the ones they aspire to in the future. More than ever, their health and well being, success in the workplace, ability to construct identities and thrive in a pluralistic society, as well as their sense of agency as active citizens, depend on it. What was once reserved for the academically endowed student is now required for all students. Advances in the learning sciences, insights into human development, and powerful examples in some schools provide the evidence we need to confirm that the vast majority of students are capable of becoming powerful learners. And yet, our school systems struggle in their attempts to meet the needs of all adolescent learners, especially those from the most vulnerable groups in society.

Education's purpose is to develop ability, not to sort people according to whether or not they already have it. – GILBERT, 2005

An agenda of 'raising the bar' to achieve excellence and 'closing the gap' to address persistent inequities in high school completion, engagement, and achievement among different groups of young people is widely shared in Canada. Often, however, excellence and equity have been viewed as mutually exclusive goals, to be addressed through discrete initiatives, resourced through different budget lines, and measured against significantly different criteria; excellence is reserved for enhancing 'bright' students' success with the academic work, while equity is translated into programs designed to help 'at-risk' students make it through school with extra support or modified programs.

Treating equity and excellence as two separate concepts reinforces an age-old idea that deep conceptual learning (i.e., experiences that engage students in actively learning to think through and build on the ideas of the disciplines they are studying) is only for some students. This way of thinking has its roots in the beginnings of public education systems; it may have served society reasonably well in differentiating pathways to adulthood, but it does not meet the needs of a society committed to success for all students.

## **ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY – OUR PROGRESS SO FAR**

Close to 25 percent of youth who enter Canadian high schools do not graduate within the standard twelve years of schooling. Even among those who do, many have a low sense of belonging, low participation rates, and lower achievement rates as they progress through secondary school. Disengagement from secondary school – whether a student leaves or struggles through – is a significant source of inequity in Canadian society, not only because it places a large number of students at a disadvantage as they make the transition to adult roles, but because disengagement is disproportionately experienced by students living in poverty, youth with disabilities, and adolescents from visible minority and aboriginal communities.

Although there has recently been some improvement in graduation rates, the patterns of inequity in engagement and achievement remain. Over the past thirty years, the correlation of these patterns with socio-economic status and family background has been rigorously documented,<sup>1</sup> but at the same time evidence is mounting that many of the problems experienced by students in secondary school – disengagement, dissatisfaction with their schooling experience, dropping out – are linked to learning environments. This evidence has given rise to a widespread interest in exploring ways to enhance student engagement.<sup>2</sup>

## **STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL CONCEPT**

Empirical studies over the last twenty years have shaped the emergence of engagement both as a strategy for improving educational achievement and as an independently valuable outcome of schooling. Early research reflected a deeply individualist paradigm that located the antecedents of disengagement in a set of demographic and social risk factors (e.g., socio-economic status and the influence of peers). Over time, the concept and its measures began to shift, reflecting increased attention to the influence of context – most commonly, school climate.

It is difficult today to find a school district that has not adopted student engagement as a lever for secondary school reform, but its popularity may overshadow the fact that the

concept of student engagement in the literature is characterized by a dizzying array of meanings. Researchers and practitioners are voicing concerns about the growing murkiness of the concept and arguing for a more coherent – and multidimensional – definition.

Most interpretations refer to a two-dimensional framework, including what we refer to as social engagement (participation in the life of the school) and academic engagement (participation in the requirements for school success). We propose that adding the more recent focus on intellectual engagement (serious psychological and cognitive investment in learning) to the social and academic dimensions provides a more complete framework for understanding the role that student engagement could play in both 'raising the bar and closing the gap' (see Table 1).

Each of these dimensions – social, academic, and intellectual – frames the conditions and outcomes of engagement differently, and when considered together they offer distinct perspectives in their stance toward students. In many ways, however, the concepts are also complementary. Whether considered alone or in unison, they are commonly viewed as ways of thinking about proactive strategies that can mediate and strengthen the impact of curricular and instructional reforms. They draw increased attention to the importance of students' experiences in school, show the connections among those experiences and a range of social, emotional and academic outcomes, and highlight aspects of school and classroom practices that contribute to healthy human development, motivation to achieve, sense of confidence, pride in success at school, and so on.

Earlier concepts of social and academic engagement assumed that characteristics inherent in the student or in his or her personal context largely determined levels of engagement. Although that perspective is giving way to a

more complex dynamic, much of the research on student engagement continues to depict engagement, "and the academic success that accompanies it, as a function of the individual, ignoring the contribution of gender and socio-cultural, ethnic, and economic status (class) factors."<sup>3</sup> The concept of engagement has remained largely interventionist in nature: "something students do and that teachers can organize for them and do to them."<sup>4</sup>

This construct of engagement, focused on remedying individual students' responses to schooling and their ability to meet the requirements for success in school, lends little to our collective understanding of how engagement is enacted in classrooms or how it affects the quality of learning experienced by students. In 2003, the American National Research Council reflected on current ways of thinking about student engagement and concluded:

Although assessing proximal goals such as increasing attendance and reducing dropout rates can mark progress that reassures us we are moving in the right direction, ultimately we need to achieve the more ambitious goal of promoting deep cognitive engagement that results in learning.<sup>5</sup>

Improving the educational experiences and outcomes for young people in Canada requires a reorientation in thinking about student engagement that grounds it more intentionally in what we want to achieve for all students. We need to extend its potential as a powerful construct for engaging both students and teachers in the transformation of schools and classrooms into places of effective teaching and deep learning. Only then will social, academic, and intellectual engagement become parts of a dynamic whole, each important in its own right, but enabling far more students to become effective learners when attended to together.

**TABLE 1 The Dimensions of Student Engagement**

	<b>Social Engagement</b>	<b>Academic Engagement</b>	<b>Intellectual Engagement</b>
<b>Definition</b>	Participation in the life of the school	Participation in the requirements for school success	Participation in learning with serious psychological and cognitive investment in learning
<b>Enabling Conditions</b>	School teams, clubs, student government, campaigns such as environment week	Official curriculum and standard measures, teacher and parental encouragement; direct and indirect consequences; individual student effort	Curriculum as discipline; exploration, understanding of concepts; development of ideas through disciplines and work on authentic problems
<b>Orientation towards Students</b>	Democratic, participatory, voluntary	Supervisory, advisory, disciplinary	Authoritative, co-determinative, constructivist
<b>Developmental Outcomes</b>	Friendships, social networks, sense of belonging, liking school	Academic success, credit accumulation, and high school graduation; post-secondary destinations; orientation to good work and personal responsibility	Knowledge-builders, problem solvers, conceptual thinkers, confident learners
<b>An Engaged Student</b>	Damian was an obviously bright student with real leadership talent; an avid hockey player out of school, he played goalie for the teachers' team 'to even things up'. He was loved by his peers but paid no attention at all to his classwork, eventually graduating at aged 21. He did not go on to post-secondary education.	Johanna's family had high expectations for her to be the first to go to university. A good student, she rarely skipped a class and worked late into the night to keep on top of her homework. When offered help to catch up on work missed through illness she remarked, "I don't need to understand, I just need to pass the test."	From an early age, Aleem was a curious child fascinated by the world around him. Following the death from cancer of a childhood friend, he became determined to understand the disease and make a contribution to overcoming it. He dug deeper in his science classes, entered a project in science fairs, and eventually began working with research scientists while he was still in school.



ENGAGEMENT FOR LEARNING

The concept of intellectual engagement draws on a rich variety of insights about how people learn.<sup>6</sup> We know that effective learners take responsibility for their own learning, persist in face of difficulties, and find intrinsic value in the work that they do. For students, this means solving real problems, engaging with knowledge that matters, making a difference in the world, feeling respected, learning subjects that are connected to other subjects, learning from and with each other and people in their communities, and connecting with experts and expertise.<sup>7</sup> Carol Dweck found that, “the most motivated and resilient students are not the ones who think they have a lot of fixed or innate intelligence [but those] who believe that their abilities can be developed through their effort and learning.”<sup>8</sup> Her experiments also revealed that students’ concepts of self as learner are affected by, and can be changed by, the nature of feedback that they receive from important adults, including teachers. This finding is at odds with widely held views that schooling outcomes primarily reflect innate ability. What all students want (and need) are learning environments designed for deep intellectual engagement through which they become expert learners.

When students are intellectually engaged, they experience serious personal, psychological, and cognitive investment in learning or, as Sharon Friesen describes it, “an absorbing, creatively energizing focus requiring contemplation, interpretation, understanding, meaning-making and critique which results in a deep, personal commitment to explore and investigate an idea, issue, problem or question for a sustained period of time.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, intellectual engagement draws on social and emotional as well as intellectual domains of educational practice.

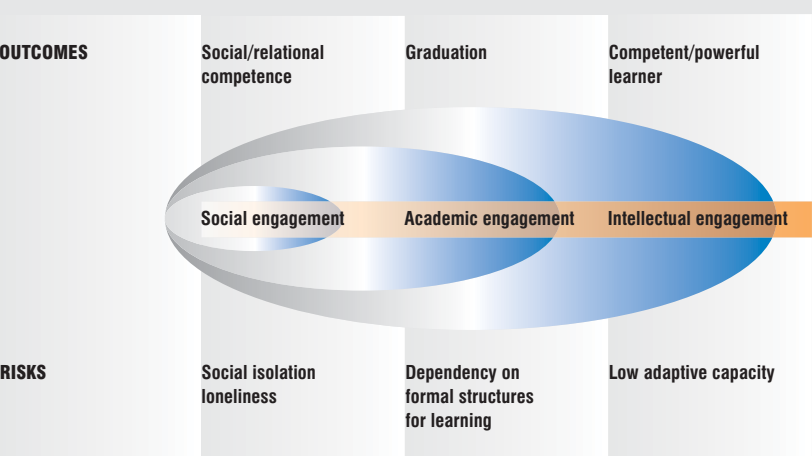
We believe that the elaboration of the concept of student engagement to account for the concurrent value of social, academic, and intellectual engagement would advance a profound shift in patterns of achievement among adolescent learners. (See Figure 1.)

LEARNING RELATIONSHIPS

If student engagement is important to developing a more cohesive approach to achieving excellence and equity in Canadian secondary schools, how do we bring it about? A key place to start is with an examination of the relationships through which students engage in schools, in classrooms, with communities, with their peers, and with the work of learning itself.

Connections to adults – parents and others – are integral to the process of healthy human development. Trusted adults can be invaluable to young people, whether they are learning to drive, struggling over a group to belong to, navigating early romantic engagements, or making choices about their high school courses. Although the lives of young people in and out of school are connected, the balance has shifted. Over many generations, patterns of work and leisure have evolved that separate youth from adults, so that for many young people peer relationships have emerged as the key social and cultural networks of adolescent development. Today, young people are often growing up alone, and so school remains one of the few places where they have opportunities to engage with influential adults.

FIGURE 1 INTERACTION AMONG TYPES OF ENGAGEMENT



As students progress through secondary schools, they face increasing complexity. Learning environments become more hectic, more competitive, less personalized. Students themselves consistently say that what most helped them thrive in spite of these challenges was the quality of relationships they developed with adults in their schools. These relationships make a unique contribution to young peoples’ emerging adaptive capacity, self-sufficiency, resiliency, confidence, and knowledge of self. Our ideas about teaching are often still focused on the primary relationship between the student and content material. This limited view overlooks other important aspects of adolescent development: risk-taking, making choices, experimenting in new ways of thinking and feeling, and experiencing autonomy and meaningful roles that allow them to see how they can make a difference in the world. These all need to be an integral part of students’ school experience, supported by adults who approach their relationships with a spirit of caring, empathy, generosity, respect, reciprocity, and a genuine desire to know students personally.

Learning environments are also active social networks, and peer groups can exert a major influence in shaping social and academic relationships in schools, both positively and negatively. Although the public expresses concerns about school safety, schools are among the safest places for youth, physically. However, they can be emotionally unsafe. Efforts to improve school climate have been a central focus of school reform, but they are often thwarted by contradictory messages conveyed through punitive disciplinary policies that emphasize individual over group behaviours and classroom climates that emphasize competitiveness and difference over collaboration and inclusiveness. As students develop, they need opportunities to experience learning environments that model ethical, fair, respectful and cooperative behaviour – learning to know each other and making choices about participating in the life of schools and classrooms. They also need opportunities to work with each other and with adults to know that they can shape changes in these relationships.

Adolescence is a period of human development when children begin to try out adult roles, responsibilities, and identities. This process is not linear; as young people develop, they need to trust important adults to provide respectful guidance and an increasing scope for independent decision-making. Interestingly, however, as adolescents manage this period of rapid personal change, the adults in their



The Canadian Education Association's (CEA) emerging *Agenda for Youth* aims to bring new ways of thinking about youth and their learning to the forefront. The *Agenda* rests on two key convictions: 1) there are effective ways to create powerful learning experiences for *all* students and 2) transforming schools to improve the experience and outcomes of learning for all students requires a significant shift in our current designs for learning, the beliefs we hold about the purpose of schooling, and the knowledge we draw on to understand adolescent learning and development.

CEA believes student voices need to be heard as we re-think the modern purpose of schooling and learning environments. The *Agenda for Youth* was built on what we learned from the young people who created *Imagine a School...* and those who shaped Design for Learning,<sup>10</sup> two events that helped shift our perspectives on student engagement and provided the impetus for *What Did You Do in School Today (WDYDIST)*, a three-year research and development project launched in the 2007-08 school year.

Under CEA's theme of *Getting it Right for Adolescent Learners*, WDYDIST was designed to test the potential of these new ways of thinking about the concept of student engagement (see Figure 1) and their relationship to classroom practices and student achievement.<sup>11</sup> In the first year, ten school districts and approximately 30,000 students, Grades 6 -12 joined the project, which invites students to share their experiences of social, academic, and intellectual engagement. The purpose of the project is to understand what students are doing in classrooms; how they feel about their experiences of learning; whether and how the work they are asked to do contributes to learning; and how classroom practices could be improved to create more effective and engaging learning environments.

lives often trust them less and subject them to more rules than much younger children.

The nature of the decisions that teachers make about how and what students learn also factors significantly into students' experience of engagement, but social support by itself is unlikely to produce a deep commitment to learning. Engagement in learning – intellectual engagement – develops when students encounter work that is relevant, interesting, and connects with their aspirations and interests; when the work they do is authentic, challenging, deeply conceptual, highly social, and collaborative; when the ideas of each student are valued; and when the relationship between teacher and student, and among students themselves, is both reciprocal and generous in spirit.

### EMBRACING ENGAGEMENT

While we contend that a clear and consistent focus on school and classroom practices that affect all dimensions of engagement – social, academic, and intellectual – is key to enabling far more students to become effective learners, it will not be easily achieved. Basic structures of schooling in the middle and secondary school – from timetables to class groupings and teacher assignments – often mitigate against the development of the kind of relationships and classroom practices that we have described. A disconnect between in-school and out-of-school learning is often magnified by students' personal use of technologies unavailable to them in school. Furthermore, the growing competitiveness for marks as measures of competence for entry to post-secondary institutions detracts from a focus on deep learning. The growing number of calls to 're-imagine' school may be an indication of our readiness to contemplate the possibility of 'doing school' differently. Perhaps we could allow willing schools some latitude to work out new arrangements more supportive of deep learning for all of their students. When all students become competent and powerful learners for life, we can fairly claim both excellence and equity in public education. **I**

**JODENE DUNLEAVY** is a writer in Nova Scotia working with CEA on its *Agenda for Youth*.

**PENNY MILTON** is CEO of the Canadian Education Association and project leader for *What did you do in school today?*

### Notes

- 1 D. Willms, "Literacy Proficiency of Youth: Evidence of Converging Socio-economic Gradients," *International Journal of Educational Research* 39, no. 3 (2003). Available at <http://www.unb.ca/crisp/pdf/0308.pdf>
- 2 See, for example, D. Clark Pope, *Doing School: How We are Creating a Generation of Stressed-Out, Materialistic and Miseducated Students* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).
- 3 D. Zyngier, "(Re)conceiving Student Engagement: What the Students Say They Want. Putting Young People at the Centre of the Conversation," *LEARNING Landscapes* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 2007): 97.
- 4 Luse, as cited by Ibid, 97.
- 5 National Research Council – Institute of Medicine, *Engaging Schools – Fostering High School Students Motivation to Learn* (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2003), 32. Available at [http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=10421](http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=10421)
- 6 For a summary of research in this area see J.D Bransford, A.L. Brown, and R. R. Cocking (eds), *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience and School* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1999). Available at [http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=6160](http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=6160)
- 7 Sharon Friesen, "How Students Would Design A School" (presentation at the Canadian Education Association's Rethinking Adolescence, Rethinking Schools Workshop, Winnipeg, October 2007). Available at <http://www.cea-ace.ca/dia.cfm?subsection=aut&page=07&subpage=recap>
- 8 Carol S. Dweck, "Boosting Achievement With Messages that Motivate," *Education Canada* 47, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 6.
- 9 Sharon Friesen, Literature review prepared for CEA. Unpublished (2008), 5.
- 10 Information about *Imagine a School...* and Design a Learning is available on the CEA website site at <http://www.cea-ace.ca/dia.cfm?subsection=the>
- 11 WDYDIST is a joint effort of the Canadian Education Association (CEA), the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL), and ten school districts across Canada. The project is supported by a research partnership between CEA, The Galileo Education Network, and The Learning Bar using a modified version of its survey, *Tell Them from Me*.